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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN CAMPAIGNING AQABA STYLE; INSIGHT INTO TRIBAL POLITICS IN IRBID

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm. Reasons 1.5 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) PolOff attended a luncheon in Aqaba on May 15 hosted by Dr. Mohammed Badri, a former member of the parliament for the Aqaba Governorate and current candidate for the June 17 parliamentary elections. The Aqaba governorate is composed of one district with two Muslim seats. Dr. Badri discussed his competition, odds of winning the election, and campaign strategy. PolOff also met on May 18 with Mohammed Bataineh, a member of one of Irbid's largest tribes, who was thinking of running but decided against it.

WEAK COMPETITION

¶2. (C) Dr. Mohammed Badri is a cardiologist by profession who served in the former parliament and is running again in the June 17 elections. Upon PolOff's arrival in Aqaba Dr. Badri and his unofficial "campaign manager" were eager to show off the location of his "diwan" or campaign headquarters. The headquarters are located on prime Aqaba real estate on a well traveled street. The "diwan" is composed of several Arabic style tents where voters can come listen to the candidate and discuss with him what he will do for them in parliament and to ask favors, such as monetary assistance or for help to find employment for themselves or relatives. Dr. Badri explains that although there are 9 candidates competing for Aqaba's two seats he considers himself and two others, Ziad Shweikh and Bedr Riati, as serious contenders. He casually states that Ziad Shweikh will be the other winner because Shweikh will buy the election due to his vast wealth. He dismisses Riati, the Islamic Action Front candidate, by proudly claiming that half of Riati's tribe is supporting him.

CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

¶3. (U) Dr. Badri believes he will win and explained his campaign strategy: focus on his past history of providing free medical services and medicines to poor Aqaba residents. His campaign slogan incorporates the GOJ's "Jordan First" campaign which encourages Jordanians to focus first on Jordanian issues and how they can all ensure that Jordan remains a stable and viable country in a tumultuous region. His main goals once elected will be to fight corruption, support economic reform, provide job training to the unemployed and support the King and his good relations with the United States. The only political issue in his campaign is the Palestinian issue and he supports all efforts that will lead to a fair and just solution. He believes the U.S. must play a vital role in this effort and that extremism is fueled by Arab frustration over the Palestinian problem.

WINNING VOTERS AND BRINGING THE VOTE HOME

¶4. (U) To garner support and make sure the voters show up at the polls on June 17, Dr. Badri lined up a group of volunteers whose task is to review voter lists and choose those names personally known to them. They will then visit voters at home and urge them to vote for him. Should they want to meet the candidate they can do so at the "diwan" or he will visit them personally. On election day, the volunteers are responsible for getting the voters to the polls. Aqaba has 23,475 eligible voters and will have 39 voting booths. Dr. Badri will have representatives at each of the voting booths. When asked if he was planning to participate in any debates, he responded by saying that the people of Aqaba do not want a good speaker, they want action.

TRIBAL INFIGHTING IRBID STYLE

15. (U) During the same week, poloff also met with Mohammed Bataineh, member of one of the largest tribes in the northern Irbid governorate, who told PolOff he was seriously weighing his decision to run for parliament. He explained how the tribe had held an internal election to choose one candidate to represent it in the elections. On the day of the tribal election, a group of voters arrived at the voting booth, a melee erupted and the ballot box was destroyed resulting in the annulment of the elections. Consequently, three to four candidates decided to run splitting the tribal vote. In the end, Bataineh decided not to run since splitting the vote among the tribal members diminished his chances of winning the election.

COMMENT

16. (C) Jordanian politics historically have centered around the "tribal" system in the absence of political parties. Our recent visits to Aqaba and Irbid indicate that tribal influences remain powerful--though hardly simple or monolithic.

GNEHM